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DRC: M23 kill, torture and hold civilians hostage at detention sites – new investigation

The Rwandan-backed March 23 Movement (M23) has killed, tortured and forcibly disappeared detainees, held some as hostages, and subjected them to inhumane conditions at detention sites in Goma and Bukavu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These acts violate international humanitarian law (IHL) and may amount to war crimes, Amnesty International said today.

Between February and April 2025, Amnesty International interviewed 18 former civilian detainees – all men – who had been held unlawfully in M23 detention sites in Goma and Bukavu, nine of whom were tortured by M23 fighters.

“M23’s public statements about bringing order to eastern DRC mask their horrific treatment of detainees. They brutally punish those who they believe oppose them and intimidate others, so no one dares to challenge them,” said Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for East and Southern Africa. “Regional and international actors must pressure Rwanda to cease its support for M23.”

Amnesty International is calling on M23 to immediately release arbitrarily detained civilians, including those forcibly disappeared and whose whereabouts should be disclosed. M23 should treat detainees humanely and provide them with access to lawyers and their families. Independent monitoring bodies must urgently be granted access to all M23 detention sites.

Unlawful killings at detention sites

Eight detainees said that they witnessed fellow detainees die in detention, likely from torture and harsh detention conditions. They said hundreds

were held in overcrowded, unsanitary cells without sufficient food, water, sanitation facilities or healthcare. Most were held incommunicado and denied access to their families and to lawyers.

According to testimonies from former detainees, M23's detention sites in Goma include: the provincial office of the National Intelligence Agency (ANR) known as *Chien Méchant* (vicious dog); a compound near the state-owned *Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise* (RTNC) on Mount Goma; the provincial assembly building; the 34th military region compound; and a make-shift detention centre in Kanyaruchinya, outside Goma. In Bukavu, M23 has detained individuals in the main ANR office and a military camp in Bagira neighborhood. Amnesty International is aware of four other M23 detention sites in Goma where detainees were held between a few days to over a week.

Two former detainees described how they witnessed M23 fighters kill two detainees with hammers and shoot another who died on the spot.

"I saw one man who was assassinated," said a former detainee from Goma. "It was like he was a member of a band of bandits. [M23] were asking him where he kept the weapons and where is so and so. They shot him in the stomach and the right arm, like in the shoulder."

Another detainee, at a different site, said he saw an M23 fighter kill two detainees. "The M23 [fighter] brought out a hammer and hit him in the ribs. He died on the spot. They took another person. He said he was a former member of the Republican Guard [an elite corps of soldiers that is responsible for the security of the president of the DRC]. They hit him with the hammer, but he didn't die immediately. In the morning, he was dead."

Arbitrary detentions

Former detainees told Amnesty International that M23 accused them of supporting the Congolese army or government through working with civil society, hiding or possessing weapons, knowing the whereabouts or being affiliated with other armed group members, civil servants or government officials, looting, or speaking out against M23 abuses.

Detainees said M23 never produced evidence of these accusations and at least 12 of them were not informed of reasons for their detention. M23 detained others to persuade them to work with them or to forcibly recruit them into their ranks.

Most detainees told Amnesty International they had no communication with, or visits from, their families, and were effectively held incommunicado.

The family member of one detainee, who was trying to see him, said: "They won't let me talk to him. He's in bad condition. The [M23 fighters] told me he was sick. They said: "We really whipped him, and he has wounds on his buttocks that are hurting him."

Congolese who have gone to Rwanda have also been subject to arbitrary arrest. Rwandan border officials detained at least three Congolese men in February 2025 and handed two of them over to M23 fighters in Goma. The two men were released after almost two weeks at an M23 detention site where they faced inhumane conditions.

Rwanda immigration officials also detained Victoire Hategekimana Hakizimana, a 35-year-old NGO worker, on 12 February at the Ruzizi border crossing. He has been missing ever since.

Amnesty International wrote to Rwanda's Ministry of Justice and Attorney General on 7 May 2025 and to the president of M23 and its spokesperson on 9 May 2025. The organization shared its findings and requested information about the conduct of Rwanda's immigration officials and M23 fighters in relation to specific allegations documented in this press release. At the time of publication, the organization had not received any response from Rwanda's Ministry of Justice and Attorney General or M23 representatives.

Torture of detainees

Amnesty International interviewed four family members of three detainees, who were tortured by M23 while in detention and died after their release, and a family member of a detainee who died in M23 custody.

All 18 former detainees said they were either tortured or witnessed M23 fighters torture others in detention.

At *Chien Méchant*, the compound on Mount Goma, the provincial assembly, and the 34th military region compound, former detainees said M23 fighters hit them, including with flexible wooden rods, boards, electric cables, engine belts, gun butts, or sticks, on their backs, legs, buttocks and genitals, leaving them with signs of trauma.

At least nine detainees received medical treatment for their wounds following their release, with five hospitalized. In four other cases, Amnesty International reviewed photos of wounds consistent with detainees' accounts of torture.

M23 fighters beat a man, who was later detained at the ANR office in Bukavu for three weeks, 100 times with wooden rods. Every morning, they whipped him and fellow detainees 10 times on their backsides when they

were taken to the bathroom. “[The M23 fighters] said they were giving us our morning tea,” he said.

At the 34th military region compound in Goma, two detainees held there in early March said M23 beat detainees regularly. “I was beaten for five days,” said a former detainee. “Everyone was hit. They said they were going to kill me. They said: ‘We don’t need you. We will take your wife, and we will impregnate her.’”

In Kanyaruchinya, M23 detained a civilian in late March in a shipping container for five days. Before his death at a hospital in Goma, he described to a family member how M23 fighters had pinned his arm between their knees and then broke two bones in his arm.

At *Chien Méchant*, in the early morning, most detainees were brought out of their cells to the courtyard for flogging. They were beaten on their backside with a rubber electric cable or wooden rods. In early April, one detainee was beaten so badly that he could not stand up or sit down and could only lie on the ground. Fellow detainees had to pick him up to move him.

At the Mount Goma detention site, two detainees described how M23 fighters whipped them repeatedly on their buttocks and backs. One of them recounted his experience: “They take a chair and put it on your shoulders so that you don’t move. The soldiers whip you one after the other until they get tired. As soon as the one who is whipping gets tired, another one continues. They were three or four to beat me up.”

Amnesty International’s Crisis Evidence Lab verified a [video](#), which first appeared on social media on 18 March 2025, that showed men in uniforms beating a man with wooden rods at the *Stade de l’Unité* in Goma. M23 fighters controlled the city and were the only fighters who had access to the stadium. Amnesty International has [documented](#) how M23 used the stadium to torture abducted hospital patients and caregivers in late February and early March 2025.

Enforced disappearances

Amnesty International documented several cases of enforced disappearance. Relatives looked for their loved ones at detention sites in Goma and Bukavu, but M23 fighters often refused to grant them access or denied that their relatives were there, amounting to enforced disappearances.

Amnesty International interviewed three detainees and two relatives of detainees who explained how families looked for their loved ones at M23 detention sites but were often misled by M23 fighters who concealed the whereabouts of their loved ones.

A detainee at a detention site in Goma said: "I was there five days without my family knowing. The families do the rounds [of the detention centers]. They go to the front gate, and they ask the guards: do you know if so and so is here? [The guards] check the list and say yes if they want to. Or they say no even though you are there. They lied twice to my family that I wasn't there."

One family hired a person with ties to M23 and had access to a detention site to verify their loved one was there because M23 would not reveal his whereabouts.

Ransom payments

M23 often required families to pay large ransoms to secure the release of their family members. Eight detainees said their family members paid M23 ransoms for their release. Ransom amounts ranged from a few hundred US dollars to over US\$2,000. Numerous family members visited M23 detention sites in Goma and Bukavu and attempted to negotiate ransom amounts with M23 fighters.

One family spent several weeks attempting to negotiate the release of a family member, and the amount of ransom, finally asking senior M23 members to intervene.

"My family arrived [where I was detained], and [M23 fighters] asked for money without telling them where I was," said one detainee. The family eventually paid several hundred dollars for his release.

Inhumane conditions at M23 detention sites

Five detainees held in overcrowded, collective cells on Mount Goma in February 2025 told Amnesty International there was a lack of space in some cells, which forced detainees to sleep while sitting on the concrete floor or standing up. Cells were dark, hot, and poorly ventilated. Guards brought food only once a day, usually a plate of boiled corn to be shared. There was no running water and detainees spent weeks without bathing.

One detainee said: "It was incredibly hot... People were drinking each other's urine. On rainy days, you could drink rainwater." He said that there were only three toilets for hundreds of detainees, and they were forced to unclog them by hand. The detainees were only allowed one bathroom break a day and, at night, those with diarrhoea defecated into small bags or boxes if they were available.

In mid-March, M23 moved detainees by bus from Mount Goma to the provincial assembly detention site, apparently due to overcrowding, but the cells there also became overcrowded. One detainee said he was held

in a tiny cell with many others, some of whom were ill. He said that if they complained about being sick, M23 tortured them.

At a second detention site on Mount Goma, a former detainee described being held in an underground, earthen cell. "The hole was long. It was more than 2 meters deep. It was really hot. With the heat, some people died. I lost my (relative). He died after one week [in detention]. He died from a combination of torture, lack of food, lack of water."

IHL prohibits parties to the conflict, including organized armed groups, from arbitrarily detaining civilians. Murder, cruel treatment and torture, as well as outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment, against detainees, as well as enforced disappearances, are also prohibited under IHL and may amount to war crimes. Moreover, M23's detention of civilians to compel them or their family members to pay for their release may amount to the war crime of taking hostages.

"Congolese know all too well the cruelty of M23," said Tigere Chagutah. "They continue to live in misery as international actors have become complacent, waiting patiently for a peace deal while M23 keeps brutalizing Congolese. Amnesty International demands that M23 immediately release all civilians and cease these unlawful, brutal practices."

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Associated documents

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Congo, Democratic Republic

Nord-Kivu and Sud-Kivu provinces: According to interviews with former detainees, the armed group M23 has killed, tortured and forcibly disappeared its prisoners and held some of them as hostages

[Demokratische Republik Kongo: M23-Kämpfer foltern und töten Zivilist*innen](#) (Appeal or News Release, German)

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